

My Own Story of Partridge Academy

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

My earliest contact with Partridge Academy was at a Halloween party in 1919, a year before my oldest sister graduated. I can't recall just why I was there, a mere 7th grader, but the event is as clear as daylight.

John Mott was the host, a gaunt, cadaverous figure with a strong nasal twang (he looked and sounded like George Bush) and as he told the most ghastly ghost story I've ever heard in a circle of some 50 young people, I wished I was somewhere else, anywhere else.

The story may be familiar to some *Clipper* readers, about a man not too popular in town who was challenged as he walked through the cemetery nearby by many of his enemies rising from their graves. They formed a ring around him and made him dance in the moonlight so far beyond the point of exhaustion that various elements of his physical makeup began to fall out of him until finally all that remained was his skin-shrouded skeleton. Brains that had fallen out early were passed around (ice cold spaghetti), his windpipe and voice box (a short section of garden hose), his liver (a bowl of jello), and so on. The proximity of Mayflower cemetery and the fact that, a short time before, I watched people lay my mother's body to rest there, added to my discomfort.

My second impression of the Academy (by now, also Duxbury High School) came from Mr. Mott's successor as principal, Mr. Cushman. Mr. Cushman was an affable and ample, but lovable, man and he was also completely devoid of administrative discipline -- so much so that when he tried to establish "Declamation Contests" in the manner of Bowdoin College (even though he was a Dartmouth man himself), we rebelled. It was just too much work to memorize and recite, even though Elijah Kellogg's "Spartacus to the Gladiators" had electrified the nation's orators a half century before. We didn't take to it.

The final blow was delivered by Fred Simcox, the captain of our fledgling football team and the most popular fellow in school -- big and broad shouldered. When he began his declamation memory passage on a hot Friday afternoon when everyone wanted to get home, he began with the words: "Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn, the sheep in the meadow...."

He never got to finish the rhyme for the laughter and clapping of the assembled body of young people. But there was more to come: the next Monday all the girls came to school wearing pigtails and carrying dolls. Mr. Cushman took one look at the belligerent study hall he'd called to order and dismissed us boys to the playing field back of the building (where the tree and highway departments garage their trucks today) to hold a game of baseball. I have no idea what he said to the girls, but I do know that a working compromise of some sort was worked out and a truce declared. News filtered out that Mr. Cushman would be replaced in the fall.

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My third impression of Partridge Academy coincided with this next new principal, Mr. George Greene, who was as nearly the exact opposite of Mr. Cushman as can be imagined. Just mustered out of the armed forces a few years before, following World War I, he believed the military way of doing things was the way to go. Accordingly, he organized us boys into squads, platoons and a regiment of sorts and taught us the rudiments of marching in formation and other elements of army discipline.

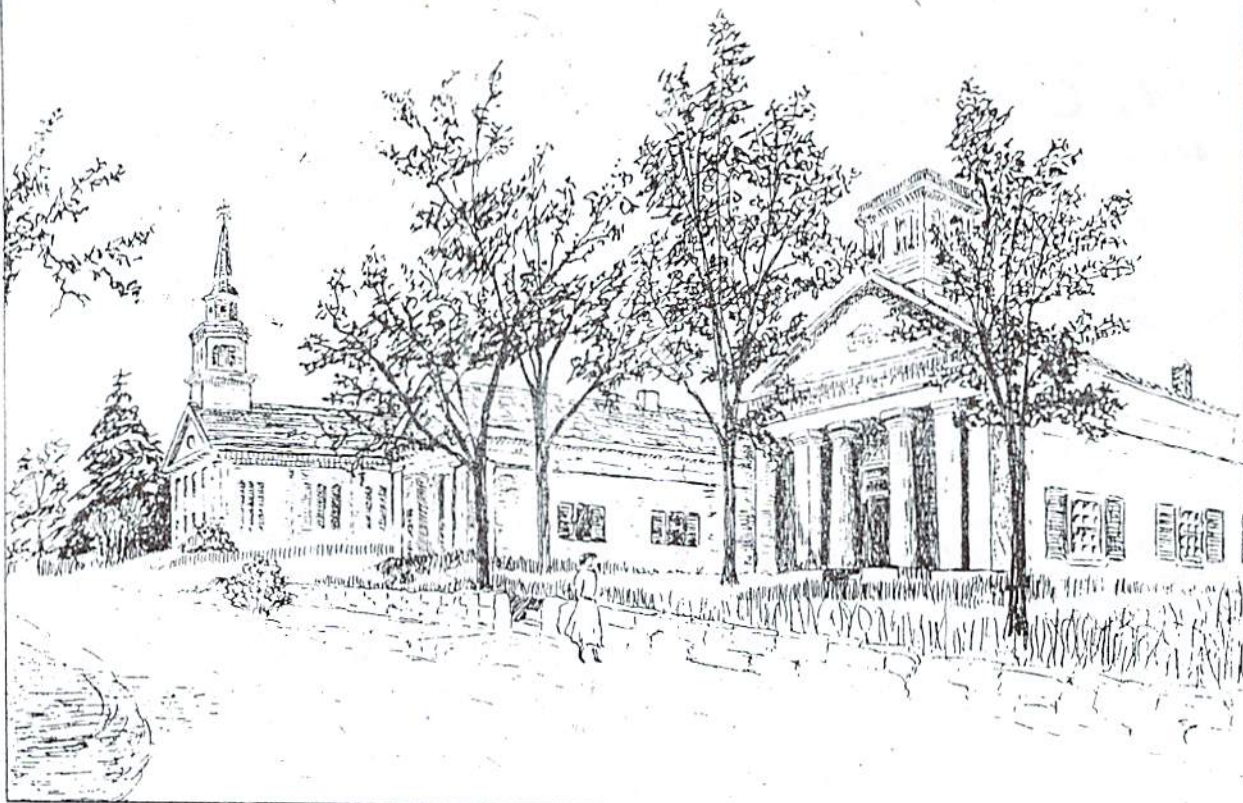
I recall vividly how he would pound his way through study hall on his rounds, always snapping his fingers to keep us on our toes. His dismissals were something else again. He would summon us to attention and only when the ticking of the big round wind-up clock on the back wall of the auditorium was clearly audible (a neat trick with 75 restless youngsters chafing to get on home and into night chores); would he let us go.

Mr. Greene went on to build the new high school on the edge of Train Field (now the elementary school) in 1935, and to receive promotion to the superintendency of all of Duxbury's schools in the rapidly growing town.

Any story of Partridge Academy must include a few background words about Duxbury's general educational situation. In Colonial times, as we all know, education centered in the home with the Bible (and I must do a story on this soon), and weekly worship in the "Meeting House," located until 1843 next to the Old Burial Ground. This custom carried over to the practice of ministers maintaining schools as a means of augmenting their meager incomes.

The first public school building was erected in 1715 opposite the end of Harrison Street on 3A. The second school of which we have record was the "Mat-takeeset Republic" boasting the first student government in American education. It was located at the juncture of King Caesar Rd. and Powder Point Ave. and received a granite marker on the occasion of the Tercentenary celebration in 1937.

Partridge Academy was the dream of perhaps Duxbury's greatest statesman, George Partridge, who, 5 years before his death in 1828, placed a request in his will that \$10,000 be put at interest and when there was thought to be enough money, to build an academy. This was done in 1844, the same year that Seth Sprague erected the building for the present Pilgrim Church, in protest over the National



1637 - 1958
Faith

IN
**THE CHURCH
CIVIL GOVERNMENT
EDUCATION**

First Parish Church built 1840
Old Town Hall built 1840
Partridge Academy built 1844

Methodist's refusal to take a stand against slavery, the burning political issue of that day.

The school was self-supportive with private tuition payments until 1881, when regular Duxbury High School pupils were welcomed with the payment of \$150 per pupil per year. This was according to George Partridge's will, as follows: "My desire and intention is to provide in my native town for a higher degree of instruction in the mathematics, geography, history and languages and other branches of good learning that the common schools supply, but not to provide a substitute for such schools so important to be constantly maintained."

Partridge had been a teacher himself for many years in Kingston, then sheriff of Plymouth County and a member of the Continental Congress, in which capacity he signed the Treaty of Paris on April 19, 1763.

Teachers throughout the Commonwealth at this time and for a period of 200 years, were all men, and mostly graduates of Harvard College. Academies were the going educational institutions for what was then believed to be "higher education," many towns supporting them also from public funds. It was a very convenient and practical arrangement and carries on in some Maine communities today.

In Duxbury, the trustees of the Academy and the school committee of the town had a very cordial working relationship, which continued up into the mid-20s, when DHS stood on its own and left the trustees of the Academy to work with the funds accruing from George Partridge's estate, some used early to assist the high school and now administered as scholarship aid to needy students for college expenses. Alumnae meet annually at a local restaurant to keep alive the Academy's traditions and the scholarship fund is open for contributions of any Duxbury citizens anxious to continue the goals of the Academy as they are carried on into college.

The Academy's most distinguished headmaster, who served also as principal of DHS, was Herbert Walker. Mr. Walker was also president of the then Rural Society, seeking to preserve a rural flavor to life in the town. He served for 13 years and it was under his influence that steps were taken to merge the 2 concepts of higher education.

It was a time of turmoil in education as it was in industry and commerce, shifting as the country was from a basically agricultural economy to an industrial one. Duxbury was especially under pressure because the clipper ships had run off the seas and steam had come in, both in shipping and railroading. The town had shifted its curriculum in schools to commercial and scientific sources, together with the traditional academics. Mr. Walker was a pioneer in this transition.

It was also about this time that Powder Point

School was established by Frederick Knapp, son of the Rev. Frederick Knapp of the First Parish Church in Plymouth. This school favored academic courses and flourished from 1886 to the early 20s, and brought a distinguished roster of faculty and headmasters who lent the town their skills and energies.

I remember Mr. Moulton, who was town moderator for many years, and Harold Stetson, who married Grace, the daughter of our saintly Rev. Lewis Thomas, pastor of the congregational church.

No Duxbury people ever attended Powder Point School, except perhaps in the early days, probably because of tuition costs. I do recall supplying them with milk from our North Hill Farm. So Powder Point School was never a rival of DHS, located opposite what is now Bumpus Park. It lived in a land apart.

We loved that beautiful old building and the symbolic image it conveyed along with the Town Hall and the First Parish Church. This triad of Greek Revival buildings all constructed in mid-century Duxbury was often the subject of architectural reports and the town was known far and wide for the manner in which it thus treasured its religion, its government and its education.

Feature articles appeared in magazines across the country, highlighting them as models for other American communities. We never felt deprived as pupils, but when I visit our vast school complex today with its neat and even glamorous classrooms with ample wall space flooded with all sorts of visuals, its polished corridors and antiseptic office spaces, I do think we were shortchanged. Except for the one story annex added to the original building under the pressure of commercialism and the new science, it consisted primarily of one large "home room" on the ground floor equipped with enormous wooden desks (one of these is preserved just outside the selectmen's office in the Town Hall) anchored to the floor and a large open room on the second floor lighted by a huge skylight. No superintendent of schools would accept this building today and looking back I can't help feeling that the architects were more interested in cosmetics than education.

Teachers "made do" with rows of partitions upstairs where, if your mind wandered, you could hear French taught in one alcove by Miss Aronoff or English by Miss Berry and so on, but if William James is to be believed, education did occur "by virtue of minimal distraction."

The downstairs room was impossible to carve up into cubicles due to the 75 desks screwed to the floor. Classes were conducted here together with study hall making a frustrating situation. But for us pupils, the wide expanse of auditorium furnished a grandstand opportunity for pranks. Why is it that young human nature resists the plain altruistic endeavor of parents and teachers to lead it in the right path? Why do kids insist on perpetrating pranks? I will mention one or two which will trigger memories of Academy graduates.

A perennial one was paper airplanes which would soar above the room and land hit or miss. Another was whistling with the wind on days when the wind found cracks and crannies tuning up with sound. A favorite prank was going to the pencil sharpener with a dozen pencils, most of which had been sharpened at earlier study halls.

Another was filling inkwells. Each of these huge desks had an inkwell in the center front (in the days before fountain pens and ballpoints) and the reserve ink supply was sequestered in a closet off the main room. To go and get the large bottle of ink, return to your desk and that of others who signified a need, was a first-rate digression. Besides all that, a flourish of tossing the bottle into the air was always appreciated by the audience. I accomplished what I believe, looking back, was my major discrepancy in

my high school years doing this. The initial toss above the cast-iron grate in the floor above the wood-burning furnace went OK, but I thought an appreciative audience deserved more, so this second time I tossed the quart bottle of ink at least a dozen feet into the air, catching the teacher's eye. The teacher uttered a shout which distracted me and let the bottle slip through my fingers and crash into a thousand fragments at my feet, resulting in a cloud of steam and stench and a quick dismissal to the principal. I reported the incident to him with less than total truth with the words, "I'm sorry, Mr. Cushman. I dropped the ink bottle and made a mess, but I'll clean it up."

Probably my last recollection of Partridge Academy can be called a prank, and it took place at another Halloween party. The party, because of student pressure, had turned into a dance, over the strong objections of puritanical George Greene, who gave in after assurances that boys would hold girls at a distance of 6 inches, only their shoulders and arms touching. Women teachers pledged themselves to keep strict watch and enforce this rule.

The highlight of the dance was to be one moment, understood by the boys, when all the lights would go out with unimaginable possibilities for closer than arm and shoulder contact, and a ghost would be lowered from the skylight, floodlighted by some of the ingenious program planners. I was selected to be this ghost, and stuffed with pillows and enshrouded with 2 large bedsheets, a rope was passed around my waist and 3 strong men lowered me down into the darkened hall. One floodlight played on me. We had agreed beforehand that if I felt endangered in the slightest fashion, I was to give 3 quick tugs on the rope and I would be lifted back at once to the relative safety of the roof. I had hardly begun the descent when the weight of my body pulled the rope, pillows and all up past my ribs into my face where I had real difficulty catching my breath. A quick 3 tugs provided my rescue and I think I was a total failure as a ghost, but the pitch dark hall provided other diversion to our friends and the night was a great success.

Partridge Academy will always live on in the hearts and minds of those who foregather at Tassy's restaurant, and its scholarship aid administered by the board of trustees continues to carry on the goals set for it by its generous benefactor a century and a half ago. The Rural and Historical Society and the Duxbury Room at the library both have treasured paintings of the school, together with the Old Town Hall and the First Parish Church, in the form of the etching I have submitted to accompany this article.

It is a memory that must not die in Duxbury.